

## An Ode in a Time of Hesitation

*Moody, William Vaughn, 1869-1910*

(After seeing at Boston the statue of Robert Gould Shaw, killed while storming Fort Wagner, July 18, 1863, at the head of the first enlisted negro regiment, the 54th Massachusetts.)

### I

Before the solemn bronze Saint Gaudens made  
To thrill the heedless passer's heart with awe,  
And set here in the city's talk and trade  
To the good memory of Robert Shaw,  
This bright March morn I stand,  
And hear the distant spring come up the land;  
Knowing that what I hear is not unheard  
Of this boy soldier and his negro band,  
For all their gaze is fixed so stern ahead,  
For all the fatal rhythm of their tread.  
The land they died to save from death and shame  
Trembles and waits, hearing the spring's great name,  
And by her pangs these resolute ghosts are stirred.

### II

Through street and mall the tides of people go  
Heedless; the trees upon the Common show  
No hint of green; but to my listening heart  
The still earth doth impart  
Assurance of her jubilant emprise,  
And it is clear to my long-searching eyes  
That love at last has might upon the skies.  
The ice is runneled on the little pond;  
A telltale patter drips from off the trees;  
The air is touched with southland spiceries,  
As if but yesterday it tossed the frond  
Of pendant mosses where the live-oaks grow  
Beyond Virginia and the Carolines,  
Or had its will among the fruits and vines  
Of aromatic isles asleep beyond  
Florida and the Gulf of Mexico.

### III

Soon shall the Cape Ann children shout in glee,  
Spying the arbutus, spring's dear recluse;  
Hill lads at dawn shall hearken the wild goose  
Go honking northward over Tennessee;  
West from Oswego to Sault Sainte-Marie,  
And on to where the Pictured Rocks are hung,  
And yonder where, gigantic, wilful, young,  
Chicago sitteth at the northwest gates,  
With restless violent hands and casual tongue  
Moulding her mighty fates,  
The Lakes shall robe them in ethereal sheen;  
And like a larger sea, the vital green  
Of springing wheat shall vastly be outflung  
Over Dakota and the prairie states.  
By desert people immemorial  
On Arizonan mesas shall be done  
Dim rites unto the thunder and the sun;  
Nor shall the primal gods lack sacrifice  
More splendid, when the white Sierras call  
Unto the Rockies straightway to arise  
And dance before the unveiled ark of the year,  
Sounding their windy cedars as for shawms,  
Unrolling rivers clear  
For flutter of broad phylacteries;  
While Shasta signals to Alaskan seas  
That watch old sluggish glaciers downward creep  
To fling their icebergs thundering from the steep,  
And Mariposa through the purple calms  
Gazes at far Hawaii crowned with palms  
Where East and West are met, --  
A rich seal on the ocean's bosom set  
To say that East and West are twain,  
With different loss and gain:  
The Lord hath sundered them; let them be sundered yet.

#### IV

Alas! what sounds are these that come  
Sullenly over the Pacific seas, --  
Sounds of ignoble battle, striking dumb  
The season's half-awakened ecstasies?  
Must I be humble, then,  
Now when my heart hath need of pride?  
Wild love falls on me from these sculptured men;

By loving much the land for which they died  
I would be justified.  
My spirit was away on pinions wide  
To soothe in praise of her its passionate mood  
And ease it of its ache of gratitude.  
Too sorely heavy is the debt they lay  
On me and the companions of my day.  
I would remember now  
My country's goodliness, make sweet her name.  
Alas! what shade art thou  
Of sorrow or of blame  
Liftest the lyric leafage from her brow,  
And pointest a slow finger at her shame?

## V

Lies! lies! It cannot be! The wars we wage  
Are noble, and our battles still are won  
By justice for us, ere we lift the gage.  
We have not sold our loftiest heritage.  
The proud republic hath not stooped to cheat  
And scramble in the market-place of war;  
Her forehead weareth yet its solemn star.  
Here is her witness: this, her perfect son,  
This delicate and proud New England soul  
Who leads despised men, with just-unshackled feet,  
Up the large ways where death and glory meet,  
To show all peoples that our shame is done,  
That once more we are clean and spirit-whole.

## VI

Crouched in the sea fog on the moaning sand  
All night he lay, speaking some simple word  
From hour to hour to the slow minds that heard,  
Holding each poor life gently in his hand  
And breathing on the base rejected clay  
Till each dark face shone mystical and grand  
Against the breaking day;  
And lo, the shard the potter cast away  
Was grown a fiery chalice crystal-fine  
Fulfilled of the divine  
Great wine of battle wrath by God's ring-finger stirred.  
Then upward, where the shadowy bastion loomed

Huge on the mountain in the wet sea light,  
Whence now, and now, infernal flowerage bloomed,  
Bloomed, burst, and scattered down its deadly seed, --  
They swept, and died like freemen on the height,  
Like freemen, and like men of noble breed;  
And when the battle fell away at night  
By hasty and contemptuous hands were thrust  
Obscurely in a common grave with him  
The fair-haired keeper of their love and trust.  
Now limb doth mingle with dissolvèd limb  
In nature's busy old democracy  
To flush the mountain laurel when she blows  
Sweet by the southern sea,  
And heart with crumbled heart climbs in the rose: --  
The untaught hearts with the high heart that knew  
This mountain fortress for no earthly hold  
Of temporal quarrel, but the bastion old  
Of spiritual wrong,  
Built by an unjust nation sheer and strong,  
Expugnable but by a nation's rue  
And bowing down before that equal shrine  
By all men held divine,  
Whereof his band and he were the most holy sign.

## VII

O bitter, bitter shade!  
Wilt thou not put the scorn  
And instant tragic question from thine eye?  
Do thy dark brows yet crave  
That swift and angry stave --  
Unmeet for this desirous morn --  
That I have striven, striven to evade?  
Gazing on him, must I not deem they err  
Whose careless lips in street and shop aver  
As common tidings, deeds to make his cheek  
Flush from the bronze, and his dead throat to speak?  
Surely some elder singer would arise,  
Whose harp hath leave to threaten and to mourn  
Above this people when they go astray.  
Is Whitman, the strong spirit, overworn?  
Has Whittier put his yearning wrath away?  
I will not and I dare not yet believe!  
Though furtively the sunlight seems to grieve,  
And the spring-laden breeze

Out of the gladdening west is sinister  
With sounds of nameless battle overseas;  
Though when we turn and question in suspense  
If these things be indeed after these ways,  
And what things are to follow after these,  
Our fluent men of place and consequence  
Fumble and fill their mouths with hollow phrase,  
Or for the end-all of deep arguments  
Intone their dull commercial liturgies --  
I dare not yet believe! My ears are shut!  
I will not hear the thin satiric praise  
And muffled laughter of our enemies,  
Bidding us never sheathe our valiant sword  
Till we have changed our birthright for a gourd  
Of wild pulse stolen from a barbarian's hut;  
Showing how wise it is to cast away  
The symbols of our spiritual sway,  
That so our hands with better ease  
May wield the driver's whip and grasp the jailer's keys.

## VIII

Was it for this our fathers kept the law?  
This crown shall crown their struggle and their ruth?  
Are we the eagle nation Milton saw  
Mewing its mighty youth,  
Soon to possess the mountain winds of truth,  
And be a swift familiar of the sun  
Where eye before God's face his trumpets run?  
Or have we but the talons and the maw,  
And for the abject likeness of our heart  
Shall some less lordly bird be set apart? --  
Some gross-billed wader where the swamps are fat?  
Some gorger in the sun? Some prowler with the bat?

## IX

Ah no!  
We have not fallen so.  
We are our fathers' sons: let those who lead us know!  
'T was only yesterday sick Cuba's cry  
Came up the tropic wind, "Now help us, for we die!"  
Then Alabama heard,  
And rising, pale, to Maine and Idaho

Shouted a burning word.  
Proud state with proud impassioned state conferred,  
And at the lifting of a hand sprang forth,  
East, west, and south, and north,  
Beautiful armies. Oh, by the sweet blood and young  
Shed on the awful hill slope at San Juan,  
By the unforgotten names of eager boys  
Who might have tasted girls' love and been stung  
With the old mystic joys  
And starry griefs, now the spring nights come on,  
But that the heart of youth is generous, --  
We charge you, ye who lead us,  
Breathe on their chivalry no hint of stain!  
Turn not their new-world victories to gain!  
One least leaf plucked for chaffer from the bays  
Of their dear praise,  
One jot of their pure conquest put to hire,  
The implacable republic will require;  
With clamor, in the glare and gaze of noon,  
Or subtly, coming as a thief at night,  
But surely, very surely, slow or soon  
That insult deep we deeply will requite.  
Tempt not our weakness, our cupidity!  
For save we let the island men go free,  
Those baffled and dislaureled ghosts  
Will curse us from the lamentable coasts  
Where walk the frustrate dead.  
The cup of trembling shall be drained quite,  
Eaten the sour bread of astonishment,  
With ashes of the hearth shall be made white  
Our hair, and wailing shall be in the tent;  
Then on your guiltier head  
Shall our intolerable self-disdain  
Wreak suddenly its anger and its pain;  
For manifest in that disastrous light  
We shall discern the right  
And do it, tardily. -- O ye who lead,  
Take heed!  
Blindness we may forgive, but baseness we will smite.